

Trade in the Decapolis-Region (Jordan)

Nora Voss

This paper presents current considerations about the regional and supra regional trade of three ancient cities in northern Jordan. This is based on ceramics collected during three survey seasons of „Historical Land-use and Landscape Reconstruction in the Decapolis Region (Jordan)“ project based at the University of Vienna and which I have analysed for my PhD research. My aim is to examine the import behaviour of the inhabitants of the individual cities, to demonstrate similarities and to work out differences. Since the ceramic material from the project is diverse, the cooking ceramics were selected to illustrate my approach and present initial results.

The analysis of the survey ceramics in general concentrated on the period between the early Hellenistic period at the end of the 4th century BC and the reign of the Umayyad dynasty in the 8th century AD. In total, 48,648 sherds from the relevant period were collected and 33,433 of these sherds have been analysed so far. The 5253 diagnostic sherds, as the most significant pieces, provide the basis for this research.

The survey took place around the ancient cities of Abila and Gadara, modern Umm Qays near Lake Tiberias, as well as around the modern village of Umm el-Jimal, further to the east, in the Hamada Desert.

Gadara and Abila lie in the fertile highlands not far away from the rivers Jordan and Yarmuk. The two cities were connected to an important east-west trading road from the Jordan Valley up to southern Syria. This road connected them with other cities of the Decapolis like Pella, Gerasa and Philadelphia (modern Amman), as well as with the region around Lake Tiberias.¹ Apart from their geographical location, Abila and Gadara also have other similarities. Both cities belonged to the Roman province of Syria from 64/63 BC onwards, when Gn. Pompey intervened during the turmoils in Judaea.² Their membership of the Decapolis, a league of towns founded during Hellenistic times, removed them from the sphere of influence of the local rulers and gave them a certain degree of independence.³

Umm el-Jimal, in contrast, was a rural settlement located in the inhospitable basalt region of the southern Hauran, which had only a small amount of arable land, and focused particularly on animal husbandry. The nearby Via Traiana Nova connected Aila, presentday Aqaba on the Red Sea, in the south with Bosra in southern Syria, and continued further northwards.⁴

Methods

Due to the poor state of conservation of the surveyed pottery – the size of most sherds varies between a matchbox and a finger nail – the focus of my research lies on the analysis of the fabric. By examining the composition of the clay and determining the inclusions⁵ a certain place of production can be assumed for some of the fabrics defined so far.

The preliminary attribution depends on published fabrics from the region, which are attributed to a production site. The results presented here must therefore be regarded as preliminary, considering that the archaeometric investigations as well as the verification of their results based on broader comparative material is still ongoing.

By analysing the results of the research undertaken so far, it is clear that the pottery assemblages from Abila and Gadara have a lot in common. The material from Umm el-Jimal in contrast is very different. It is also striking that the repertoire is dominated by a couple of wares. The cooking ware shows some interesting characteristics that can be across the entire assemblage. It is also vital to the understanding of regional ceramics trade, especially because all three sites probably did not have their own production of cooking ware.⁶

Cooking Ware

In the analysis of the survey material, ceramics were only addressed as cooking ware if they could be clearly identified as such due to their shape or other characteristics like traces of heat effects. Based on these criteria, 1570 fragments could be identified as cooking vessels.

The ceramic repertoires from Abila and Gadara can be treated as one, because the assemblages are nearly identical (fig. 1a–b). By far the largest group of pottery belongs to so-called Galilean Ware⁷. It is a group of fabrics made in the area around Lake Tiberias between the 1st and mid-4th century AD. It occurs only in cooking vessels, mainly cooking bowls and casseroles. Most frequent are cooking bowls with two grooves at the rim dated to the early 2nd – to the mid-4th century AD.⁸

They are followed in quantity by the so-called ‘Hard Red Wares’ and Jerash Terracotta,⁹ which were likely produced in Gerasa, the modern town of Jerash, located north of Amman. Both wares contain a lot of quartz inclusions and depending on the individual fabrics, lime, mica and red or dark particles. The ‘Hard Red Wares’ can be distinguished from Jerash Terracotta by a better sorting of the inclusions and the greater hardness of the sherd. The inclusions of this ware consist only of transparent quartz, mica and in some cases a little bit of lime. The focus of production of this ware lies presumably between the 4th and the 7th century AD, with Jerash Terracotta being produced between the 6th and 7th century.¹⁰

This fits well with the dating of the most common casseroles and cooking pots of this ware. Casseroles with an almost vertical rim¹¹ as well as cooking pots with an overhanging lip¹² and thin walled pots with a pronounced neck¹³ occur most often with this kind of pottery. All such vessels date to Byzantine times.

It is noteworthy that the production site of the ‘Hard Red Wares’ first produced cooking bowls that imitate a Galilean Ware bowl of the 4th-century¹⁴ before the typical casserole with a vertical rim was used.

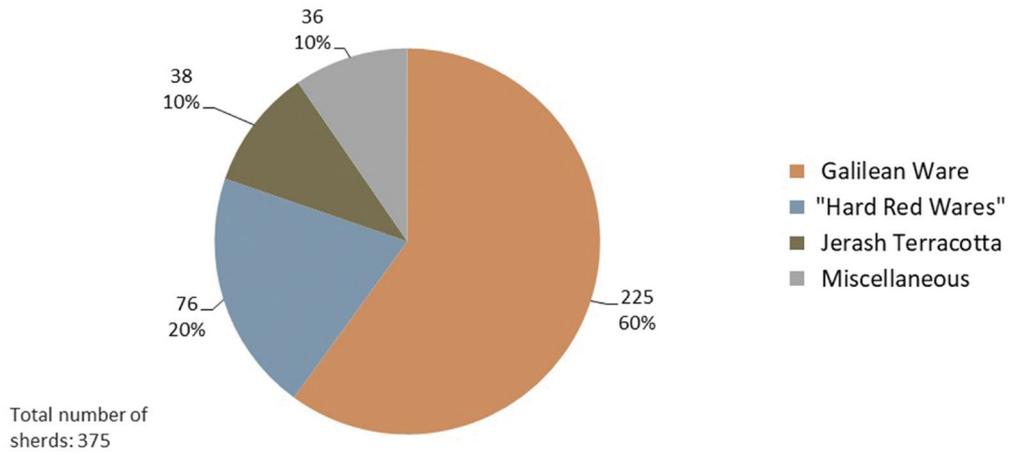


Fig. 1a: Distribution of cooking ware in Abila.

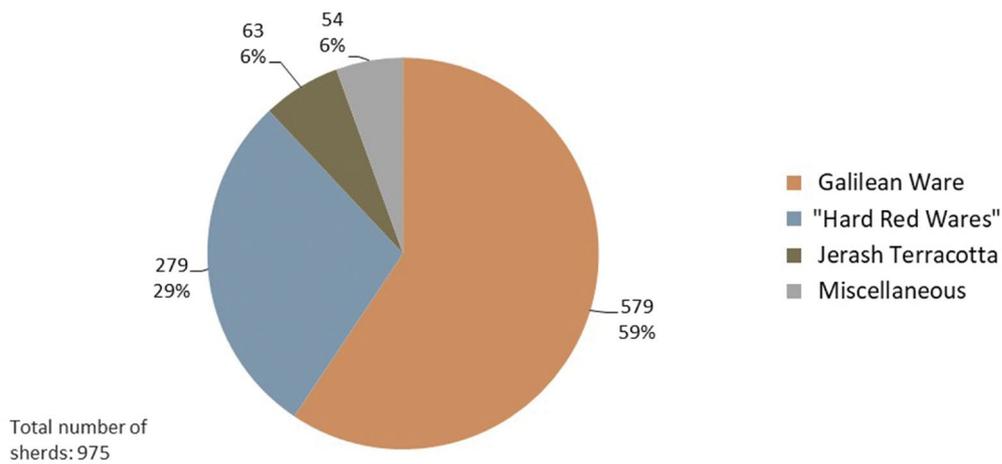


Fig. 1b: Distribution of cooking ware in Gadara.

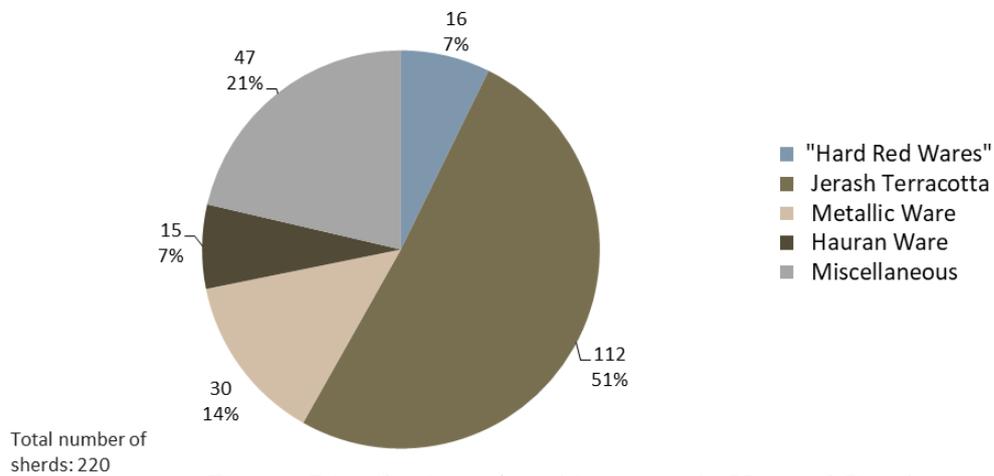


Fig. 1c: Distribution of cooking ware in Umm el-Jimal.

In contrast to this the structure of the repertoire from Umm el-Jimal (fig. 1c) is different, but also shares some characteristics. Like in the other cities, pottery from Gerasa dominates the assemblage by far, but fragments of Galilean Ware are completely missing.

During the whole survey just a single sherd of this ware was found. In Gadara and Abila, on the other hand, they accounted for almost 20 percent of all sherds, but I will discuss this in more detail later. Instead, there are wares in Umm el-Jimal that do not appear in the two other cities at all or only occasionally. This includes Hauran Ware and so-called Metallic Ware.

Hauran Ware has a characteristic dark red colour with large basalt inclusions on the surface that are partly clearly visible without a microscope. It was probably made in the region around Bosra, possibly in Si. The focus of production lies in the 1st–4th century AD.¹⁵

Metallic Ware gets its name from its sometimes metal-like appearance.¹⁶ It is often unusually thin-walled and has clear-cut shapes reminiscent of metal vessels. In addition, it often has a dull shining slip that emphasises this impression. Similarities with the fabrics of Jerash Terracotta are striking. An attribution to the production site of Gerasa is likely, but other places of origin are currently also considered. This ware was very common in the 3rd and 4th century AD.¹⁷

According to this, a change of import behaviour can be determined for Umm el-Jimal in the 4th/5th century AD as in the other two cities. The cooking pottery from Gerasa, that is, Jerash Terracotta and the 'Hard Red Wares', completely dominate the assemblage from Umm el-Jimal. Previously, the cooking ceramics seem to have been imported mainly from the Hauran.¹⁸ In addition, however, a whole series of fabrics occur that could not be assigned to any existing wares, summarised as a new one, and could thus not yet be assigned to a production site.

The assemblage of vessel shapes is not as homogeneous as that in Abila and Gadara, but nevertheless it seems that closed cooking vessels were generally more used in Umm el-Jimal than open forms. This can be traced back to the lack of Galilean cooking bowls in the statistics, but may also point to differences in the eating habits of the population. This will be further investigated in my PhD dissertation.

To summarise: before the 4th century AD Abila and Gadara imported their pottery from the western region around the Sea of Galilee, Umm el-Jimal, however, from the Hauran further north. From the 4th century AD onwards, the majority of the vessels found in all three cities were produced in southern Gerasa.

If this phenomenon was also observed at other sites in the region, this would be a revealing observation for the understanding of the mechanisms of regional trade in northern Jordan.

Whether this had solely geographical reasons or whether political and historical relationships played a role can probably not be fully understood from ceramics alone, but should be included in the analysis of trade relations in the region.

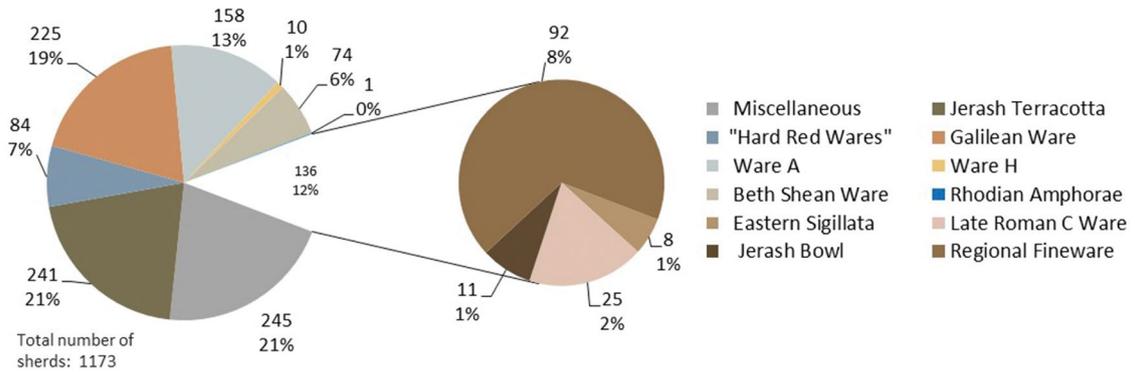


Fig. 2a: Distribution of wares in Abila.

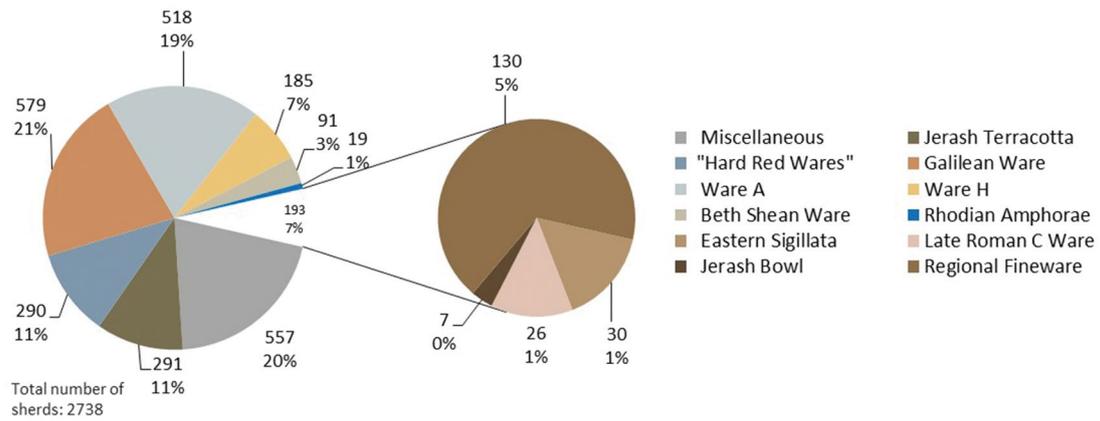


Fig. 2b: Distribution of wares in Gadara.

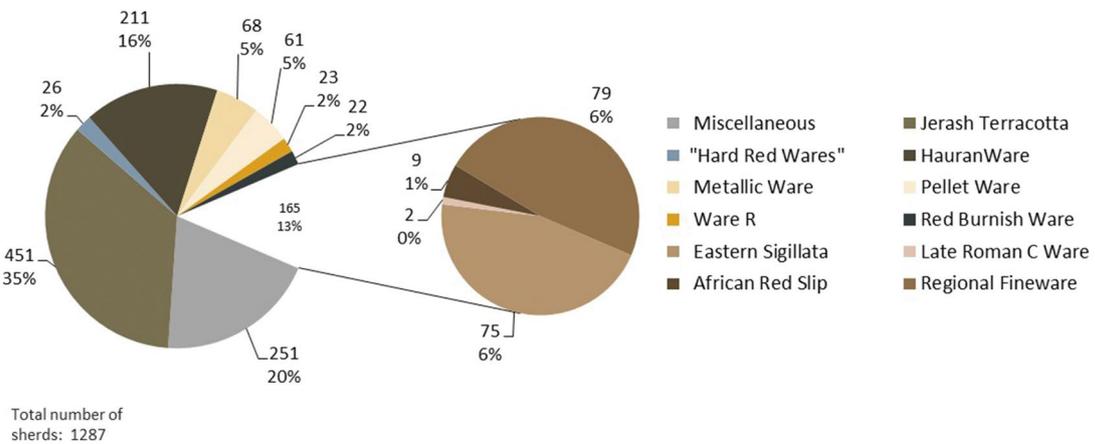


Fig. 2c: Distribution of wares in Umm el-Jimal.

Trade Connections

In any case the trade routes must be considered in connection with these results. Since maritime or river transportation, which was normally preferred in Antiquity, is not possible in this region, transport of goods by land must be assumed. By dealing with this, some open questions can be clarified.

The road network of the Decapolis region is well known for the 1st–3rd century AD.¹⁹ Later the network of trade routes is not so well explored, but sources such as the *Tabula Peutingeriana* suggest that many of the previously established roads were still used.

Milestones indicate the existence of a route system that points to the important function of the ancient cities of Damascus, Bosra, Philadelphia and Gerasa in the trade from the Near and Mid East to the Mediterranean.²⁰

Within the examined region two main routes existed. The already mentioned north-south route from the Red Sea along the still used King's Highway, which was extended between 112 and 114 AD – at the time of Trajan's rule to the *Via Traiana Nova*. The second is an east-west route from Caesarea Maritima via Skythopolis, Pella and Gerasa, which passed by Philadelphia, to meet the *Via Traiana Nova*, connecting the inland towns with the Mediterranean ports.

A proposed alternative route via Gerasa to Bosra was perhaps the road from the Jordan Valley past Gadara and Abila to the east. It should be taken into account, however, that this much shorter connection is much more difficult because of the differences in altitude.

This shows that the preferred trading partners of all three settlements are largely in line with the easily accessible cities in the vicinity. Bosra and Gerasa were easily accessed by the *Via Traiana Nova* from Umm el-Jimal. Gadara and Abila are located on a commercial road connecting Skythopolis and the region around Lake Tiberias with the settlements in central Jordan. Gerasa is also relatively easy to reach.

Complete Assemblage

Extending this knowledge to the entire ceramic assemblage from the survey project, results are indeed comparable. Again, the similarities of Abila and Gadara are clearly visible (fig. 2a–b), as well as the strongly differing structure of the material from Umm el-Jimal (fig. 2c). As the diagram shows, Galilean ware, 'Hard Red Wares' and Jerash Terracotta, as well as Hauran and Metallic Wares, are the most widely represented ceramics in the entire assemblage. It should be noted that Jerash Terracotta, but also the two wares that only occur in Umm el-Jimal, also appear in other vessel types, not only in cooking vessels.

Equally prominent are the probably locally produced coarse wares represented here as Ware A and H (fig. 2a–b). Locally produced ceramics are also dominant in fine ceramics. Very interesting are the Jerash Bowls²¹, listed here separately, which imitate forms of African Red Slip vessels, and another group of vessels, which imitates forms of Late Roman C Ware but which could not be assigned to a specific production location.

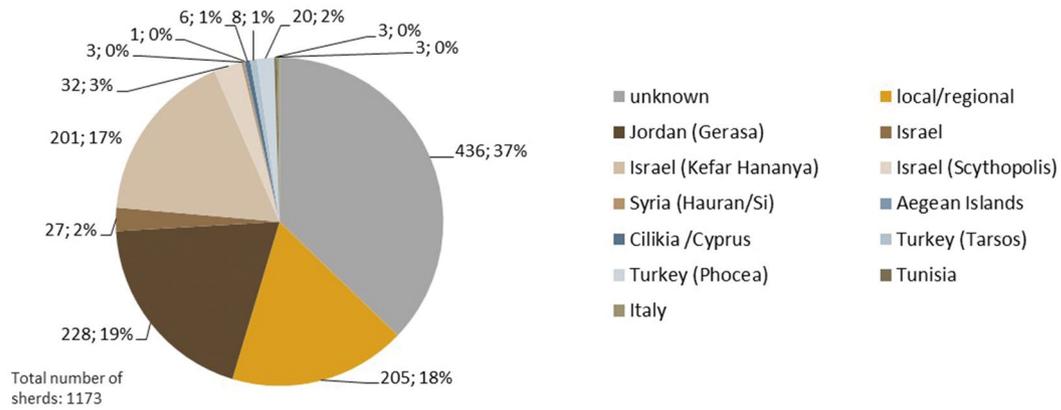


Fig. 3a: Provenance of ceramics in Abila.

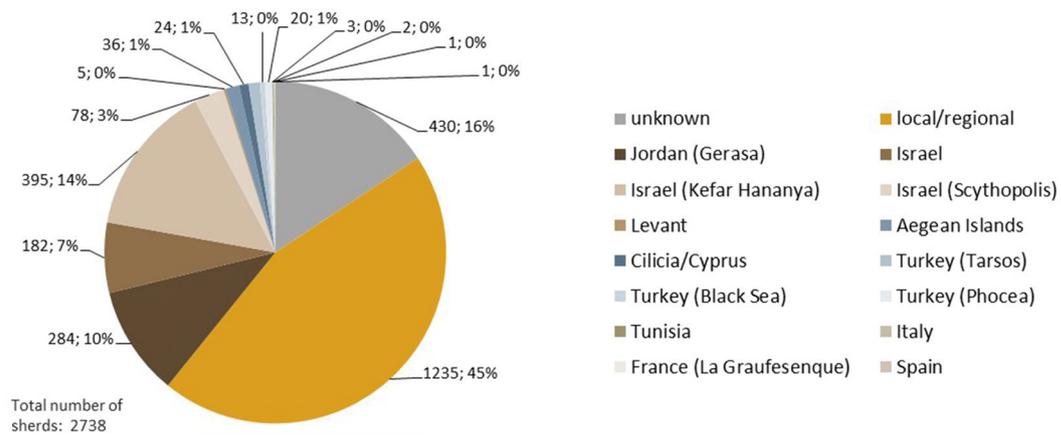


Fig. 3b: Provenance of ceramics in Gadara.

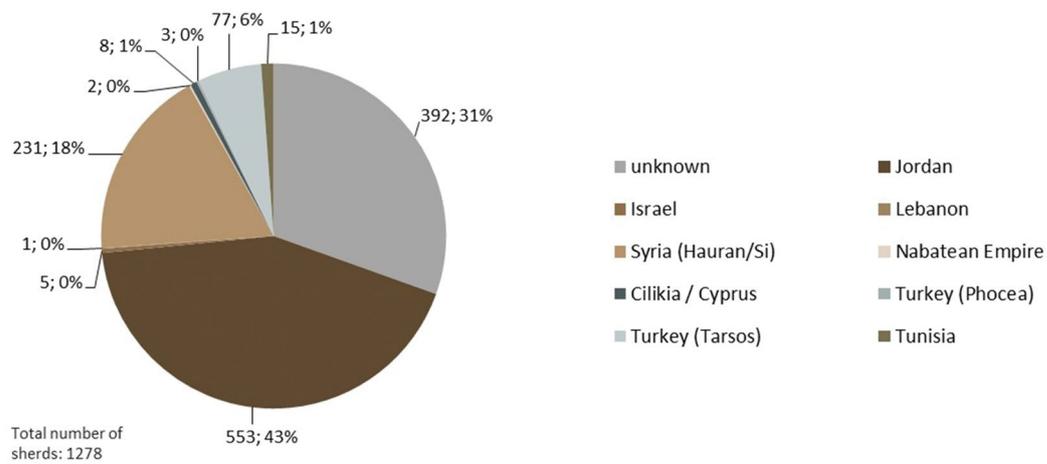


Fig. 3c: Provenance of ceramics in Umm el-Jimal.

The graph shows the dominance of local and regional ceramics (fig. 3). The yellow coloured part represents the ceramics that were probably made in or around Abila or Gadara. Unfortunately, no workshops were located so far. The segment shown in brown refers to wares produced in the region. I consider regional wares to be from production sites in the modern states of Jordan, Israel, Lebanon and southern Syria. Together they make up the largest share of ceramics. Especially in Umm el-Jimal, which probably did not have its own ceramic production, more than 50% of the ceramics come from the surrounding areas. The blue coloured unit indicates ceramics from the eastern Mediterranean. Here, above all, emerge table wares from production sites located in modern Turkey, including Eastern Sigillata A and Late Roman C Ware as well as Late Roman Amphora 1 fragments that occur mostly in Umm el-Jimal. Especially in Gadara also sherds from more distant production sites can be detected. Among them, a total of 19 fragments of Rhodian amphorae are remarkable. Some of the handles found have stamp marks.

Also outstanding are single fragments from amphorae from the Gulf of Naples and from Spain as well as a fingernail sized rim of a Sigillata from Gaul. This shows that Gadara had a larger inflow of ceramics from faraway regions of the Roman Empire, perhaps because of its location or character.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to highlight that the ceramics presented here derive from a survey. This means archaeological artefacts which were taken from their original context and deposited in a secondary one. In addition, the assemblage, which results from this secondary context only provides a very selective, exclusive picture of the real repertoire of ceramics present in each respective ancient settlement. What I would like to point out is that, although the tendencies of trading behaviour of the inhabitants of a city can be seen in the trade patterns, it does not have to reflect them one-to-one. Thus, the presence of imported ceramics does not necessarily require trade contacts to the place of production, nor does the absence of a ceramic type indicate the non-existence of exchange. The sporadic presence, especially of imported amphorae and other vessels, in which goods have been transported, can also be explained by the second-hand use of such vessels.²² For example, an amphora with Rhodian wine might have been traded in one of the coastal cities and after it was emptied, it could have been transported as a pure transport vessel filled for example with water to a different place where its fragments were found.

The absence of a ceramic type may have several reasons. On the one hand, it may simply not have been found yet. During the survey, only a limited area of a site was covered. This represents only a fraction of the total area. On the other hand, the particular character of a settlement at a certain time as well as its size must be taken into account.

For example: the frequent appearance of Late Roman C Ware, African Red Slip Ware and Jerash Bowls in relation to Eastern Sigillata A in Abila can be explained by a stronger settlement and its greater prosperity in Late Antiquity. In contrast, around Umm el-Jimal we searched an area where the earliest settlement and its necropolis was presumed. In this area we found almost all the Eastern Sigillata A sherds discovered during the survey.

This shows both the potential and the difficulties that the evaluation of this material entails. On the one hand, the analysis of ceramics makes it possible to make detailed statements about the social and cultural aspects of the examined cities. On the other, the material must always be viewed as a whole. Statements should not be made easily without examining all aspects of the assemblage and alternative explanatory models.

Notes

¹ Gregoratti 2011, fig. 2.

² Wineland 1992, 105 f.

³ Zangenberg – Busch 2003, 117.

⁴ Gregoratti 2011, fig. 1–2.

⁵ In order to give a standardised and comprehensible description of the fabric, the Munsell Soil Color Charts (Baltimore 2009) for colour determination were used. To the shape, the sorting, and the frequency of the inclusions and air pockets, I use the estimates from Kinne 2006, 28–30. In the determination of the inclusions, I follow the assessments of Orton et al. 2013, 236–237.

⁶ See for Umm el-Jimal: Osinga 2017 and for Abila and Gadara upcoming article often he author.

⁷ Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 60–78. 155–156.

⁸ Common in the survey assemblage: Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 91–97 fig. 1B. 5. 13. 20; 100–103 fig. 1D. 3 (cooking bowls); 128–130 fig. 4E. 2; 132–135 fig. 4E. 3 (cooking pots); 103–109 fig. 1E. 5. 8 (cassarolls).

⁹ The term „Jerash Terracotta“ is inherited from E. Osingas work about the ceramics from Umm el-Jimal(2016, 166). The name is derived from a assumed production site in Gerasa (modern Jerash). It shows great similarities with Vincent Clark and Robert Falkner’s type C (1986, 251) and Alexandra Uscatescu’s group C (1996, 46) at Jerash, as well as Susanne Kerner and Lee Maxwell’s “Terracotta” (1990, 241) at Gadara. On the base of new perceptions, other places of origin are currently also considered.

¹⁰ Osinga 2016, 166; Kerner – Maxwell 1990, 241.

¹¹ Vriezen – Wagner-Lux 2015, 133. 319 fig. XII. 22 nos. 11-14; Kerner – Maxwell 1990, 246 fig. 37 no. 15.

¹² Hennessy et al. 1992, 135. 139–141. 146–147 fig. 92:8. 98:12; Nielsen et al. 1993, 178 fig. 20; Kerner – Maxwell, 1990, 246 fig. 37.11; Loffreda 1974, 46–47 fig. 10.6.

¹³ Cf. Segal et al. 2009, 128 fig. 133; Hennessy et al. 1992, 173 fig. 108:4.

¹⁴ Cf. Form Adan-Bayewitz 1B (Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 91–97).

¹⁵ Freeman 1995, 63.

¹⁶ Freeman 1995, 63; Osinga 2017, 163.

¹⁷ Freeman 1995, 63.

¹⁸ A similar trend can be seen within the material from an excavation trench from the city centre of Umm el-Jimal analysed by E. Osinga in her PhD.-Thesis, cf. Osinga 2016, 234–236.

¹⁹ Thomsen 1917, 32–75.

²⁰ Gregoratti 2011, 513–519 fig. 1–2.

²¹ Csitneki 2017; Uscatescu 1995; Watson 1989.

²² Gassner 2001, 135 f.

Image Credits

Fig. 1–3: by author

References

Adan-Bayewitz 1993

D. Adan-Bayewitz, Common Pottery in Roman Galilee: A Study of Local Trade, *Barllan Studies in Near Eastern Languages and Culture* (Ramat-Gan 1993).

Csitneki 2017

D. Csitneki, Jerash Bowls: Fine Tableware from Jerash, in: A. Lichtenberger – R. Raja (eds.), *Gerasa/ Jerash: From the Urban* (Aarhus 2017).

Freeman 1995

P. Freeman – D. Kennedy, Southern Hauran Survey 1992. Appendix: Ceramic Evidence, *Levante* 27, 1995, 39–73.

Gassner 2003

G. Gassner, Materielle Kultur und kulturelle Identität in Elea in spätarchaischer-frühklassischer Zeit. Untersuchungen von Gefäß- und Baukeramik aus der Unterstadt (Grabungen 1987–1994), *AF* 8 (Vienna 2003).

Gregoratti 2011

L. Gregoratti, The Role of the Decapolis Region in Connecting Inland Syria with the Mediterranean Coast, *ARAM periodical* 23, 2011, 509–525.

Hennessy et al. 1992

J. Hennessy – A. McNicoll – R. Smith, Pella in Jordan 2. The Second Interim Report of the joint University of Sydney and College of Wooster Excavations at Pella: 1982 - 1985, *MedA Suppl.* 2 (Sydney 1992).

Kerner – Maxwell 1990

S. Kerner – L. A. Maxwell, *Keramik. Gadara Vorbericht 1986-1988*, *AA* 105, 1990, 239–251.

Kinne 2006

A. Kinne, *Tabellen und Tafeln zur Grabungstechnik* ⁴(Dresden 2006).

Loffreda 1974

S. Loffreda, *Cafarnao II: La Ceramica* (Jerusalem 1974).

Nielsen et al. 1993

I. Nielsen – F. Gorm Andersen – S. Holm-Nielsen, *Gadara – Umm Qes III: Die byzantinischen Thermen*, Abhandlung des deutschen Palästina-Vereins 17 (Wiesbaden 1993).

Orton et al. 2013

C. Orton – P. Tyer – A. Vince, *Pottery in Archaeology* (Cambridge 2013).

Osinga 2016

E. Osinga, *The Countryside in Context: Stratigraphic and Ceramic Analysis at Umm el-Jimal and Environs in Northeastern Jordan (1st to 20th century AD)* (PhD Diss. University of Southampton 2016).

Segal et al. 2009

A. Segal – J. Mlynarczyk – M. Burdajewicz – M. Schuler – M. Eisenberg, *Hippos-Sussita: Tenth Season of Excavations (July and September 2009)* (Haifa 2009).

Thomsen 1917

P. Thomsen, *Die römischen Meilensteine der Provinz Syria, Arabia und Palaestina*, ZDPV 40, 1917, 1–103.

Uscatescu 1995

A. Uscatescu, *Jerash Bowls and other Related Local Ware from the Spanish Excavations at the Macellum of Gerasa (Jerash)*, AAJ 39, 1995, 365–408.

Vriezen – Wagner-Lux 2015

K. J. Vriezen – U. Wagner-Lux, *Gadara – Umm Qes II. The Twin Churches on the Roman-Byzantine Terrace and Excavations in the Streets*, Abhandlung des deutschen Palästina-Vereins 30/2 (Wiesbaden 2005).

Watson 1989

P. Watson, *Jerash Bowls: Study of a Provincial Group of Byzantine Decorated Fine Ware*, Syria 66, H. 1, 1989, 223–261.

Wineland 2001

J. - D. Wineland, *Ancient Abila. An Archaeological History*, BARIntSer 989 (Oxford 2001).

Zangenberg – Busch 2003

J. Zangenberg – P. Busch, *Hippos und Gadara. Ein Hauch von Welt am See*, in: G. Fassbeck – S. Fortner – A. Rottloff – J. Zangenberg (eds.), *Leben am See Gennesaret: Kulturgeschichtliche Entdeckungen in einer biblischen Region?* (Mainz 2003) 117–129.